

Bilingualism in Children: A Pilot Study on Arabic Speaking Pre-KG Children's English Literacy

Dr. Rasha M. Abd-Elrahman Moussa

Assistant Professor

Department of curriculum and teaching methods
Jazan University, Jazan City, Saudi Arabia

M. Ragia El Sayed Eisawy Hussain

lecturer

Department of Home economics
Jazan University, Jazan City, Saudi Arabia

ثنائية اللغة عند الأطفال: دراسة تجريبية حول مهارات القراءة والكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية لدى أطفال ما قبل الروضة في التحدث باللغة العربية

المستخلص:

تقوم هذه الدراسة التجريبية بتقييم ثنائية اللغة في سياق تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية للأطفال الناطقين باللغة العربية في مرحلة ما قبل الروضة، من خلال القائمين على رعايتهم وخدمهم المنزليين، لتحديد أساس تعليم اللغة في مرحلة الروضة. أجريت الدراسة على سكان المملكة العربية السعودية حيث يتم تبني اللغة الإنجليزية كوسيلة للتواصل، إلى جانب ارتفاع معدل العمالة المنزلية في المجتمع لكل أسرة. الطريقة التي تستخدمها الدراسة هي مزيج من المقاطع العرضية؛ ومراقبة الأطفال، وإجراء مقابلات مع والديهم. تم أخذ عينة من بيئة التدريس والتعلم غير الرسمية المتمثلة في ستة أطفال دون سن خمس سنوات من ست أسر متطوعة. والمنهج المتبع في الدراسة: المنهج التحليلي الوصفي. ومن خلال النتائج التي توصلت إليها، تضع الدراسة عدة معايير لمواد تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية في رياض الأطفال والتي من شأنها توفير المواد الحالية.

الكلمات الدالة: ثنائية اللغة، رياض الأطفال، عاملات المنازل

Bilingualism in Children:

A Pilot Study on Arabic Speaking Pre-KG Children's English Literacy

Abstract

This pilot study evaluates bilingualism within the context of the pre-KG Arabic speaking children to English language literacy through their caretakers and domestic workers, for any KG language instruction basis to build on. The study is conducted within a population of Saudi Arabia where English language is barely embraced as a medium of communication, besides the society's high domestic workers per household rate. The method the study uses is a mix of cross-sectional; observing the children, and interviewing their parents. A sample is drawn from the odd informal teaching-learning environment represented in 6 below 5-year-old children from 6 volunteer households. The method used in the study is (the descriptive analytical method). Through its findings, the study lays down several benchmarks for kindergarten English language teaching materials that would provide the currently improvised ones.

Key words: Bilingualism, Kindergarten, Domestic Workers

INTRODUCTION

Background

A unique sociolinguistic situation is going on in the Arab Gulf region of six states: Saudi Arabia, Oman, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain. The social side of the situation is the high rate of non-Arabic speaking menial (domestic) workers as per household in this region of the world –if not the highest ever (ILO Org, 2019). Whereas, the linguistics side of it is that, English is not that common among the populations of these 6 states are native Arabs –at least in their day-to-day life communication. The sociolinguistic situation that arises from these two anomalies is that, families are keen on teaching their children English at early stage for both economic and social reasons. Besides that fact that, English is the (officially) the second language in these 6 states, the region is known to be a global job market attracting foreign labor from all over the world. For example, Saudi Arabia alone hosts foreign labor from more than 100 countries; the majority of which are domestic workers (GLMM, 2018). Now, the question is who tutors these children of pre-school age, before they are sent to kindergarten- at the age of 5 in Saudi Arabia? In the Kingdom –virtually the same in the rest of the other 6 Gulf countries, it is parent(s), but according to HRW Org (2016) domestic workers; mainly babysitters and also housemaids are tasked as an off-line duty in many cases. The two organizations cited above, takes the station from a human

perspective in advocacy for the rights of these domestic workers, whereas the situation has a sociolinguistic dimension as well.

Problem statement

At what stage can bilingual children acquire L2 while developing L1, is a vague area to explore within the scope of language acquisition in children. The task is especially challenging where the children have minimal exposure to L2 which, in this case, they are below 5 years old who are yet developing their native Arabic tongue. Besides, it is such a narrow context to conduct a study on since observing this slim slice of pre-KG children within a span of the 2 months; a significant portion of their very age. Not to mention the fact that, the pace/amount of English literacy acquired, is barely observable with this slim allowance in terms of both age and duration. Not to mention the particularity of the informal learning setting and the tutors who are domestic caretakers –babysitters, housemaids, cooks. Then, and above all these odds, it is an Arab region where English is not so popular and barely a second language. The study nevertheless, finds gauging these children’s literacy aptitude is necessary and its findings are of value to a standard pre-school English teaching material.

Aim of the study

Addressing the issue of English language teaching and learning, is chronic in the Arab world, and this study is intended for palpating the root of the problem. By this humble contribution to addressing pre-school English language teaching and learning, it add to researches on this field. This is besides highlighting the vague area of bilingualism in children especially of the early childhood who are still developing their L1.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the level of English language literacy that the pre-KG Arabic speaking children may have been acquiring through their domestic caretakers, for the purpose of building on it. It seeks to establish a reference baseline of the minimal and maximum level of literacy achieved through this informal learning environment after determining factors related to the independent and dependent variables. The study finally hopes lay out a framework for kindergarten’s English language teaching material.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bilingualism from birth to late childhood is the subject of study by several linguists including McLaughlin et al., (1995.), Noam Chomsky (1970), and Brown (2000. According to Bialystok (2016) whose study included surveying a sample of fifty-one (51) right-handed male and female children. The ages of the children ranged between 96–141 months and subdivided into three groups: Gr-1 of 19 bilinguals from birth [2L1], Gr-2 of 18 second language learners [L2L], and Gr-3 of 14 monolinguals [1L1]. All the sample subjects had French or Dutch as first language and L2 of the bilinguals were restricted to Germanic languages. The children were healthy without sign of linguistic or neurological disorder. The result of the study found that, bilingual children showed higher behavioral congruency effect of these tasks compared to monolingual controls, which is matched by the recruitment of brain regions that are used in general cognitive control, language processing or to solve language conflict situations in bilinguals (caudate nucleus and STG, precuneus). The study concluded that, the activation of these neurological physiological areas was found to be higher in learning L2 to L1 compared to L1 to L2. The paper by Benson (2010) is a compilation of several empirical researches specific to younger learners at the, University of Auckland. The collective studies included: “Morpho-syntactic Acquisition in the Second Language” another on “Child Second Language Learners Compared with Monolingual Age Peers”

and “Language Shift and First Language Loss”. The collective studies outlined the distinctiveness of child SLA learning as characteristics of children’s cognitive, emotional, and social development. The distinguishing variables associated adult L2 learners, creating intriguing issues for effective SLA pedagogical techniques for children learners. Children acquire their native L1 language, at a very early stage of development. As they begin to show signs of verbal communication in 6-8 months with “cooing”, then with “babbling” going to 12 month, then from 18 month above start producing recognizable words. Starting from late childhood or up to the age of 36 month children start composing two or more sentences.

In contrast, a study cross-cited by Bellini & Pereda & et al (2016) refers to a study from the University of Oregon was conducted on a group of 1,146 children. They were divided into three groups based on their language proficiency: those who spoke English only, those who spoke both Spanish and English, and then a third group that included those who spoke Spanish only at the beginning of the study. However, during the follow-up period, which extended for a year and a half, they were able to speak English fluently along with Spanish. According to Genesee as cross-cited by Ayman (2020) he argues that, bilingual children were lower in linguistic skills than their monolingual peers. Ayman counter-argued saying, even in these studies this only continued until the age of 5, and then they became like their peers. She explains, there are pieces of evidence that the linguistic safety of bilinguals from mixing the two languages together came within the framework of the correct grammatical rules after the age of 3. From this two views it means that the mixing of words here does not indicate any problems related to the development of language learning, but only because the child knows a synonym for it and does not know the other. Thus, the claim that bilingualism poses an obstacle, loses to the claim that children who learn two languages at a young age develop degrees of disorder and delay.

Although bilingualism is a hot topic amongst the community of speech and language professionals according to Kohnert, Yim, & et al (2005), but it is likely because of the many questions it raises when it comes to children with language impairments. The researchers argue that, many parents and professionals sometimes raise concerns that a bilingual language learning environment isn’t ideal for children with language delays, but recent studies disproved that. They cite a research has shown that bilingualism does not pose any extra disadvantage for these children or conflict with L1. Opposing voices by (modernized) Arab like the researchers Akhtar & Menjivar (2012), argue that, with degrees of misconception among the conservative Arab societies that, teaching children English may lead to the child being separated from his identity, affiliations, perhaps That was found invalid. Recent studies found that it is an advantage for a child to learn a second language (English) at a very young age, but the real problem around which all these allegations revolves around two pretexts: the protective sentiment towards Arabic, and conflict with the Islamic values. Another “anti-English” counter voice, is of the educator Ayman (2020) who opposes: “Arab parents wrongly imagine that the child’s brain will cause serious symptoms; ignoring the linguistic relativism by this hypothesis was designed to handle only one language, and nothing more. From here arises an idea that says when we try to add English language we overload the brain beyond its capacity”. They even claims while it roots from worries about culture and child behavior. It is all about the misconception that, a child’s openness to English from a young age might steal his Arab identity and the traditions of his society.

METHOD OF THE STUDY

It is a mix of exploratory and qualitative narrative method of research, adopted in this study. This method suits this study considering its cross-sectional nature that combines two instruments of collecting the data: children observational and interviewing their parents.

Sampling frame

The population of the Saudi households who have younger than 5-year-old children and employing non-Arabic speaking domestic workers; i.e. babysitters, housemaids; is targeted for the sample. A random sample of a total 6 children; 3 boys and 3 girls, is taken from 6 households.

Table (1) Participants and Sampling

	Narrative qualitative	Cross-sectional qualitative
Participants	Interviewing parent And/or Interviewing caretaker	Children themselves
Sampling frame	Stratified sampling	Cluster sampling
Notes	Reflect and recount on how data collecting based on the interviewees' recount reflection.	Narrative qualitative data collection interviews with the parents.

Data collection

With a rate as high as 28% domestic workers per Saudi household by 2016 stats according Manahi (2018), it was not a laboring task reaching out to volunteer parents to allow short time observation of their and take the interview. A total of 6 households volunteered as they are from where the researchers live and work –a locality of the Western Province of Saudi Arabia. Both the observation the parent's interviews took place in a span of two months; from June 4 to July 28, 2023. Each of the researchers was comfortable in visiting the chosen household and spend awkward time that ranged between 60min to 1:30 hour each time, mostly in weekends.

Target scope of literacy

Devising a relative assessment criterion for the target literacy rather than a standard ESL literacy, is necessary in this setting. This is due to the factor referred to in the introduction of this paper; which is the low communality of English language in the environment of the children. Hence, a preset 4-literacy- area assessment tool is devised as shown in Table (2) below:

Table 2. The 4-literacy-area Assessment Tool

Literacy item	Particulars	Relativeness rationale
① Alphabets	Consonants	! Clusters and vowels not included, ! Identification is by sound or shape of letter
② Numbers	Single digits	! Count/identify numbers from 1 to 10 ! Able to identify as a digit or by objects' count
③ Vocabulary items	Size and type	! A set of 100 words max ! Include 4 word forms: (<i>nouns, pronouns, vb., adj.</i>)
④ Sentences/phrases	Multi-word and intelligible	! No grammar considered (tense, word order) ! Length of sentences not considered ! Intelligibility is by comprehension and/or production

As an informal learning setting –with no syllabus, notebook/board writing, classmates or planned instruction process, the writing language skill is excluded from this 4-item target literacy reference.

Analysis method

The analysis method used is by categorizing the size of the literacy items acquired into three groups: high acquisition children, medium acquisition children and low acquisition children. This grouping by acquisition rate enables conjoining factors that might have enhanced acquisition such as the parents' and the tutor's contribution to learning the literacy items.

RESULTS

The researchers obtained and extracted the data from their observation sheets including the 6 children's literacy acquisition during the period. The tags "high, medium, low" are categories representing the levels of acquisition, are assessment tool used by the researcher. The observation thus, has yielded the result in Table (1) below:

Table 1. Result

Child	Gender	Age	Caretaker	Acquisition
Jomana	Girl	4.2	Housemaid	Medium
Faiz	Boy	4.5	Housemaid	Low
Zafir	Boy	4.1	Babysitter	Medium
Nofa	Girl	5	Housemaid	High
Mutlaq	Boy	4	Housemaid	Medium
Shahad	Girl	4.4	Babysitter	Low

Only one child is found to belong to this category; the 5-year-old Nofa, whose caretaker is a housemaid. The rest of the 5 children showed split literacy rate: 3 medium acquisition: the 4.2 year old girl Jomana, the 4.1 year old boy Zafir; and the 4 year old boy Mutlaq. Whereas, under the "low acquisition" category it included the children: the 4.5 old boy Faiz and the 4.4 old girl Shahad. In a glance on this result, the gender of the child does not seem be of any impact on the children's acquisition of English.

Besides, the parents' responses to the interview questions were recorded and extracted as supporting assessment input data. In some cases, the caretaker contributed either voluntarily or after being promoted to.

DISCUSSION & FINDINGS

The high acquisition children

Nofa the 5-year-old child who was the only one found to belong to this "high acquisition" category, her caretaker is a housemaid. Nofa was found to recognize all the 21 consonants in addition to the 5 vowel letters satisfactorily. In addition, Nofa was found to recognize the numbers 0-10, besides 18 English vocabulary items, and she responds to commands in 12 phrases and sentences. The factor to be associated with Nofa's "high acquisition" rate has to do with her two parents' work status and keenness of teaching her English. From the background shared by Nofa's mother, both parents work in an organization of all-English environment and they have plan of sending her to international kindergarten and later foreign school. The parents also said they emphasize on the housemaid that she communicate in English with Nofa. This "exposure" factor is an established one, even though the amount of exposure predicts development in the weaker but not stronger language in bilingual children with developmental disabilities (Kohnert, Yim, Nett & et al, 2005). In line with this, the interview with Nofa's mother

added some details such as “mouth”, when is asked to. Besides, Fofa’s mother said she know where the “bathroom” was, the “cat” as well as she could ask for something like “candy”, “milk” or imitate say words like “delicious”, “bedroom”. However, according to Nofa’s mother, she had a limited ability of composing longer than two or three-word phrases giving the example of “in the afternoon!”

A finding to draw from this “high acquisition” case of the 5-year-old girl, even though her acquisition of English literacy is relatively high, it is viable as a bar for how much literacy can be achieved from such informal learning environment, sporadic exposure and the lack of writing efforts.

The medium acquisition children

The 3 children who were found to belong to this “medium acquisition” category, are: the 4.2 year old girl Jomana, the 4.1 year old boy Zafir; and the 4 year old boy Mutlaq. The children who have different domestic caretakers –2 housemaids and 1 babysitter, showed variant degrees of literacy items’ mastery that averaged: recognized 15 consonants (failed X, P, V); 2 vowel letters; all the numbers (0-10) and 10 English vocabulary items, satisfactorily. The three children share a few learning characteristics which are of interest. First, their parents’ interview contributed responses added facts such as: he/she recognizes more/better without being promoted, recognizes more/better while watching TV; and he/she confuses the items. This situation is interpretable by Brown (2000,p.5) explanation: “Language develops in the child spontaneously, without conscious effort or formal instruction..” and he continues, “...is qualitatively the same in every individual , and is distinct from more general abilities to process information or behave intelligently”. Farther parents’ interview responses added some details such as Multlaq’s mother saying he could dictate the alphabets consecutively from letter A bur gets stuck somewhere between letter O and N. In addition, Zafir’s mother said he could name objects in the surrounding like pointing to his “head”, “eye”, but he could not name her “tongue” and “neck” for example. Jomana on the other hand, showed ore progress in preconizing daily habit verbs such as, “sleeping time” and “going out”. The “Sequential Second Language Learners” were described by Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams (2013). It states that, the sequential learner’s children as those who have become familiar with one language, but introduced or required to learn a second language. The sequential learning in this case of a non-English speaking child enters an English-dominant classroom show lateral progress in some areas of the L2.

A finding to draw from this “medium acquisition” case of the 3 children, despite the variance in their levels of acquisition indicates a reasonable amount of literacy. This category of children which included different depths of caretaker involvement in transferring literacy, sets the bar of what KG tutors may have to expect and where to start.

The low acquisition children

The “low acquisition” category it included the children: the 4.5 old boy Faiz and the 4.4 old girl Shahad. The children whose domestic caretakers are housemaid and babysitter respectively, showed variant degrees of literacy items’ mastery that averaged: could recognize 14 consonants; no vowel letters; recognize most of the numbers (failed G, H, N) and responded correctly to 6 English phrases. Taking the two children separately, the boy Faiz has school leaver working parents and the Filipino housemaid does not spend enough time with the big-size family of 7 children. On this regard McLaughlin & et al., (1995) explains “children may persist in using their first or native language L1 even if others do not understand them for the first few days”. Whereas, Shahad who is taken care of by a babysitter, ironically, showed less interest in responding to her mother who was trying to prompt her, neither did she to the researcher. In fact, the Indian babysitter herself did not seem to be interest in getting

engaged in the trials and this might explain Shahad's disinterest. Farther parents' interview responses added some details such as she could tell the parts of the body when the maid pointed at them. This was explained by Kreps, J. (2019) who cites Stage IV "Productive Language" simultaneous L2 learning by several studies. It states that children are ready to express their own thoughts and construct their own sentences. It also describes these sentences as may be very basic or grammatically incorrect I the beginning and improve over time.

A finding to draw from this "low acquisition" case to which belong one-third of children, their levels of literacy acquisition represent the bottom line indicator which though, still far better than other children who are not exposed to English literacy because the family has no domestic care taker.

CONCLUSION

The limited exposure of the pre-KG native Arab children to English language literacy, is found to be a viable foundation for building on a formally structured KG. The variance in the levels of the children achieving the basic literacy is insignificant. It is negligible not only because of the individual differences and the child-caretaker closeness, but also due to the scarcity of English language use in their surrounding at all. The two sources of achieving the basic literacy –the domestic caretakers and the prevalence of English language in their surroundings, are found to be complementary to each other. Therefore, should take into account that the in-coming KG children are more familiar with English language than believed and their familiarity is growing with the social one. The parents on the other hand, have no reason to worry about any negative L1-L2 interference in this stage of language development and acquisition.

IMPLICATIONS

The decades of social resistance towards embracing English language seems to have relented in the face of globalization. The Saudi pre-school educators must have realized this fact, after, and more importantly, KG teachers who shoulder the task of improvising KG English materials. Evidently, these below 5 years old children are more or less familiar with basic English language literacy to build on, and it is where to carry on. Setting out from this foundation would make easier to plan a 6 months introduction to writing the alphabets, numbers, and a lexical content.

References

- Alothan, H., & Alsager, H. (2022). Acquisition of L2 English spatial deixes by Arabic-speaking children. *Front Psyche Sec. Psychology of Language*. Volume 13 - 23(2):
DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.997110
- Anesthesiol, K.J. (2017). Introduction of a pilot study. Vol. 2017 Dec; 70(6): 601–605. Published online by Junyong In; 2017 Nov 14. DOI: 10.4097/kjae.2017.70.6.601
- Ayman, E. (2020). The Difficulties of Learning English for Arabic Speakers. By International TEFL & TESOL Training (TEFL). <https://www.teflcourse.net>
- Benson, J. (Ed.), *Advances in child development and behavior*. Chapter 3. Vol. 42 (pp. 41–78). Elsevier Publications. eBook ISBN: 978-0-12-815113-6
- Brown, D. H. (2000). *Principles of language learning & teaching*. (4th ed.). New York: Longman. (pp. 2-6).
- Byers-Heinlein, K., & Lew-Williams, C. (2013). Bilingualism in the early years: What the science says. *Published PMC* 2018 Oct 2.2013. Autumn; 7(1): 95–112.
- Elttayef, A., & Hussein, N., (2017). Arab Learners' Problems in Learning English Language: A Teacher Perspective. *Research Journal of Finance & Accounting*. Vol.8 No.23 2017. Published at: www.iiste.org

- Kreps, J. (2019). Language Spotlight Series: The Importance of Bilingualism in Early Childhood Education. File No. 201-755-5585. *TESSA International School*. Available at:
<https://tessais.org/importance-bilingualism>
- ILO (219). Domestic workers and employers in the Arab States. Regional Office for Arab States. International Labor Organization. Cited at: https://www.ilo.org-documents/wcms_619661-PDF
- Lowry, L. (2008). Children learning English as a second language: We don't have all the answers, but we know more than we think. Site Assists. Author: Language Pathologist and Hanen Staff Member. Hanen Organization. <https://www.hanen.org/SiteAssets/Articles>
- Rodríguez, M. (2015). Families and Educators Supporting Bilingualism in Early Childhood. Full Text File No. EJ1085. From: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/.pdf>
- Yule, G. (2010). The study of language. (4thed.) Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University: (pp.161-171)